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# Magical moments to be found in The Scarlet Letter

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[Tulsa Performing Arts Center](#) kicks off 2011 with Theatre Tulsa's ambitious production of Phyllis Nagy's *The Scarlet Letter*, based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel of the same name about adultery in 17th century, Puritan Boston. It's ambitious, for tackling Nagy's script is no easy task. Advocates assert that Nagy has distilled the essence from Hawthorne's novel by weeding out all the unessential bits. Detractors argue that she has done quite the opposite and produced a charmless and characterless piece of self-indulgence. The truth is probably more that Nagy has sampled Hawthorne's novel for her own end, though what that end might be is still being debated.

The received wisdom is that this is essentially a psychological drama given a modern flavor. However, director Michael Wright cleverly avoids this argument altogether and gives a totally fresh take on proceedings. Tulsa Theatre's production highlights the fairy tale quality of the play, replete with a sultry witch, a humpbacked ogre seeking revenge with poisonous potions, a fairy child who loves the deep, magical woods with the ability to see things others can't and a minister who has visions. The result is an at times cleverly engaging piece to watch, but one which is often trapped by the inadequacies of the script.

In fairness to Nagy, her use of language is contemporary, but it's never exactly enlightening. Innuendos abound, of which many are quite funny, but many wouldn't be out of place in a Benny Hill sketch. The end result is there's a lot of talk about sex, but very little sexual energy. Dialogue is further hampered by contradictory statements which make it difficult for performers to create convincing characters. This is most evident with Hester Prynne who professes to love the child born from her adulterous liaison and yet sees her as a punishment, who believes she herself should be punished but is unashamed of her adultery and who won't tell of her evil husband's misdeeds even though she despises him. Some might argue that a more experienced cast might have made more of this, but the truth may well be that there's simply not sufficient meat in the script for actors to work with.

As a result pacing suffers at times and performances are a mixed bunch, with some actors sparkling on occasion but not throughout. Brigid Kimery Vance as Hester Prynne was satisfactory

during the first act but really didn't come alive till the second act when the script gave her more scope. Xavier Sagel as Arthur Dimmesdale also suffered during the first act but again became more convincing during the second. Freddie Tate as Governor Bellingham had a difficult task making what is essentially an unconvincing cipher appear interesting. Those performers who immersed themselves in the fairy tale quality of their character proved to be the most successful. Andy Axewell as Master Brackett was wonderfully engaging as was Richard Luttrell as the ogreish Roger Chillingworth. Premadonna Braddick as Mistress Hibbins, the sultry witch of the woods cradling her mirror was delightful as was Leanna Duncan as the fairy like Pearl Prynne and the plays narrator, who brought a wonderful energy and skittishness to the production and was riveting when on stage.

Production values were high, as evidenced in the costumes, lighting, sound and set design, however, the set design was curious. Rather than focusing on the woods as have many previous set designs, the woods here appear to be in the distance and a graveyard dominates stage right. Stage left, which functions primarily as a scaffold, is built around what appears to be a prison cell, though it is never used and serves no real dramatic purpose, becoming yet another symbol amongst a welter of symbols and metaphors.

Phyllis Nagy's *The Scarlet Letter* feels less an adaptation and more of a remake. Unfortunately it's feels less like *King Kong* and more like *Fame* in that it doesn't have the richness of the original and fails to take sufficient strides of its own to become something truly unique. Tulsa Theatre's production suffers a little from this, but those moments when it comes together and pushes its fresh and challenging approach to the limit, there are moments of magic on the stage and not just in the woods.

*The Scarlet Letter* runs at the John H. Williams Theater, Tulsa Performing Arts Center, till January 22nd. Tickets are \$15.00. Performance begins at 7.30 p.m.



**Chris O'Rourke**  
Tulsa Theater Examiner

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